



Wolf Krötke, *Karl Barth und der “Kommunismus”: Erfahrungen mit einer Theologie der Freiheit in der DDR* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich), 2013.

The publisher describes this fine little book (it's a slim 83 pages) thusly:

Karl Barth beunruhigt auch über 40 Jahre nach seinem Tod noch die Gemüter in der Schweiz und in Deutschland. Dass er ein Theologe von grossem Format war, müssen ihm selbst seine entschiedenen Gegner zubilligen. Aber die üble Nachrede, ein «Kommunist» gewesen zu sein, hält sich standhaft.

Wolf Krötke nimmt diese auch jüngst wieder erneuerte Nachrede zum Anlass darzustellen, wie die Theologie Karl Barths Kirche und Theologie in der DDR motiviert hat, freie Kirche und freie Theologie in einer Diktatur zu sein. Er begründet die Ansicht, dass Karl Barths Theologie zu den geistigen Voraussetzungen der «friedlichen Revolution» in der DDR gehört.

To carry out his plan, Krötke lays his book out in three parts:

- 1- Die Religion wollte partout nicht absterben (pp. 9-20).
- 2- Karl Barth als Theologischer Gesprächspartner (pp. 21-58).
- 3- Gottes Gerechtigkeit als Recht der Gnade in der Theologie Karl Barths (pp.59-84).

The first chapter is an absolutely withering critique of what can only be fairly described as an incompetent and ill-informed examination of Barth's relationship to Communism penned by one Erwin Bischof titled *Honeckers Handschlag*. That book was written in 2010 and Krötke is no fan. Not in the least. And he makes his feelings plainly known, writing, for example

Man muss Bischof zwar zugutehalten, dass er von der Theologie nicht viel versteht (p. 8).

And a bit further, Krötke derides Bischof for discussing the so called “left Barthian” Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt (whom Bischof, in his ineptitude, calls Marquart) (p. 18). Not that Krötke is being small or pedantic. Bischof’s book is, by all accounts, wretchedly inaccurate on numerous counts.

Having finished off Bischof (and leaving little more than a stump remaining), Krötke turns next to a more accurate portrayal of Barth’s theological ideas vis-à-vis both Communism and Socialism. Barth was neither, Krötke demonstrates clearly, but rather a theologian concerned with Freedom. Or, more precisely, Barth was a theologian who spoke a great deal of the ‘partnership’ between God and man.

Krötke’s evidence is drawn primarily from that period of time during and shortly after the Second World War and Barth’s work therefrom. It was this ‘church under pressure’ which Barth addressed and for which he was concerned. He concludes that Barth’s theology stood in direct opposition to the ‘privatization’ of religion in a pluralistic culture.

The final segment of the book focuses on the righteousness of God and grace in the theology of Barth. The Trinitarian God is the Redeeming God and man is his partner in that redemption without contribution but with reception.

In all, Krötke’s fine little volume is an excellent summary of Barth’s doctrine of Grace and how that doctrine rebuts any claim that Barth was somehow ‘a Communist’ in his thinking. I commend this book to your attention and those of you who are students of the Theology of Barth especially will enjoy it.

But it will also, I think, be interesting to students of post-War theology, since our author lived and worked in East Germany before making his way to the West and thus was familiar with the impact of Communism and how Barth was read and understood in those circles.

Tolle, lege!

Jim West
Quartz Hill School of Theology